

## **Water: The Key to World Peace?**

**Rabbi Ariel Rackovsky**

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In a world where Jewish blood is cheap; in a world in which the words of *Tefillat Geshem*, “דמם  
שפכו עליך כמי - the Jewish people spill blood like water, and the world cares not a whit- what is  
there to say? On this Shemini Atzeres, is there any glimmer of hope, any lesson we can learn,  
anything we can do? I don't know...but I think there is a fascinating lesson found in a book by a  
man named Seth “Yossi” Siegel, whom I was privileged to know during my tenure at The Jewish  
Center. Yossi Siegel is a renaissance man; a former assistant district attorney, a wildly successful  
entrepreneur, a producer of a Tony Award nominated Broadway show and a member of the  
Council on Foreign Relations. Of late, he has dedicated his frightening intelligence and  
incredible resourcefulness to the problem of water, and wrote a book called *Let There Be Water:  
Israel's Solution for a Water-Starved World*. Israel is, of course, perpetually hard-up for rain and  
has developed numerous technologies for dealing with the issue. These include desalination, drip  
irrigation, artesian well digging and sewage treatment. It is estimated that Israel treats more than  
85% of its sewage water, and Israel has shared these technologies with developing nations. Yossi  
Siegel asserts that Israel does not just have something to offer developing countries- it can  
potentially save first world countries contending with water shortage, like California and Texas.  
In the future, if water continues to be as scarce as it currently is, there could be wars fought over  
water and water rights- wars have been fought over less- and Israeli collaboration can prevent  
that, if the countries so hostile to Israel are willing to set aside their fervent hatred in the interests

of pragmatism. Yossi Siegel's model of water as the key to world peace is fascinating and should get us thinking, especially today, when our special prayer, *Tefillas Geshem*, may carry the same message.

In a few moments, we'll join together in the recitation of the Tefillas Geshem, the prayer for rain. Each paragraph names another person in whose lives water played a central role. The fourth paragraph, however, is quite puzzling:

זְכוֹר מְשׁוּי בְּתִיבַת גּוֹמָא מִן הַמַּיִם  
נָמוּ דְלָה דְלָה וְהַשְׁקָה צֵאן מַיִם  
סְגוּלֵיךָ עֵת צָמְאוּ לְמַיִם  
עַל הַסֵּלַע הָךְ נִיֶּצְאוּ מַיִם  
בְּצַדְקוֹ חוֹן תַּשְׁרֵת מַיִם

Remember the one who was saved from the water in a reed basket,  
Who provided water from the well to a herd of cattle,  
Your chosen nation thirsted for water  
He hit the rock and water came out  
In the merit of his righteousness grant water to those who need it.

What lovely poetry this is! And appropriate, too, as Moshe *did* have formative experiences involving water. But each of the other verses recounts events in the lives of the people mentioned that were *triumphs*. Here, the prayer recounts Moshe hitting the rock against divine directive, which was one of his greatest failures, as his disobedience caused him to lose his right to enter the land of Israel! One explanation given is that it refers to the first time Moshe brought water to

a parched nation, when he struck the rock in accordance with God's command. But why choose this event? The second time Moshe hit the rock greatly overshadowed the first, permissible time. Furthermore, there are other events regarding Moshe and the water that the author could have used, like Moshe splitting the sea! What is the meaning of this prayer and why do we invoke Moshe's greatest failing at a time when we seek his merit?

Rav Yitzchak Meir Alter, the first Gerrer Rebbe, explained that in fact, this action was one of the most heroic things Moshe ever did. He knew that the nation of Israel was rebelling; had he spoken to the rock and the rock poured forth water, it would have resulted in an even harsher judgement of the Jewish people, whose listening skills would be compared unfavorably to those of a rock. When he realized that this would be the outcome, struck the rock instead, thereby drawing away God's wrath from his flock and redirecting it toward himself. Can you imagine? Moshe was prepared to give up everything he held dear in life, to sacrifice the fulfillment of his deepest wishes and most dearly held ambitions, in order to save his people from embarrassment and harsh judgement. In order to preserve the faith of his people in God and in order to preserve their dignity, Moshe made extreme sacrifices-and therein lies the challenge for us, for if water is meant to restore peace in the world, if water is what we are praying for, we need to learn the lesson of Moshe's aquatic sacrifice. Our sages tell us that one who embarrasses a friend in public, one who takes glee in the public suffering of others, is compared to a murderer<sup>1</sup>, to one who spills blood. And at a time when Jewish blood is cheap, ***we must not be the cause of spilled blood, not even metaphorically.*** Now, we may not always be the cause of the embarrassment,

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<sup>1</sup> Bava Metzia 58b

but we certainly enjoy it when *others* embarrass *themselves*. There is even a word for this- unsurprisingly, it is in German: *Schadenfreude*. We live in a culture in which the downfall of others, especially if it is public, is greeted with some degree of glee and a great deal of judgement. This past week, a hoax was circulating on Facebook that went something like this:

*"Now it's official! It has been published in the media. Facebook has just released the entry price: \$5.99 to keep the subscription of your status to be set to 'private.' If you paste this message on your page, it will be offered free (paste not share) if not tomorrow, all your posts can become public. Even the messages that have been deleted or the photos not allowed. After all, it does not cost anything for a simple copy and paste."*

Of course, this is not true. Anyone with half a brain knows that their facebook posts are public and that, nowadays, “privacy” is an illusion anyway. But as gullible as people were in posting this as their status, people were even more gleefully vicious in taking down those who had fallen for the hoax. I can tell you from experience that it feels *great* to call out a benighted friend for believing one of those silly urban legends, so beautifully categorized on snopes.com. That warm glow of moral and intellectual superiority lasts for hours! The lesson of Moshe challenges us to be extremely careful and exceedingly reticent about taking delight in the mistakes and personal embarrassment of others, and to do whatever we can to help them save face as well.

But causing the embarrassment of others is not just something we do actively- we do it passively as well, when we don't intervene to prevent it from happening. In the recent edition of the Siddur *Chelkas Yehoshua*, originally authored by the Rav Yechezkel Yehoshua Rabinowicz zt"l, the Biala

Rebbe, there is a line printed right before *Lecha Dodi* from his son, the current Biala Rebbe, Rav Ben Zion Rabinowitz. He writes, in one of the volumes of his work *Mevaser Tov*,

ומצווה לסייע ביד הש"ץ המנגן ולזמר יחד עמו, ואם לאו, הוא בגדר אביזרייהו דשפי"ד

It is a *mitzvah* to sing along the shaliach tzibbur, and if you don't, it is a minor form of spilling blood. When we don't sing along, we are leaving the *shaliach tzibbur* high and dry, trying to sing on his own with no crowd support. I realize that at this very moment in time, as I am about to lead *mussaf*, this is a completely self serving example, but that makes it no less valid. Yes, some *baalei tefillah* have poor tune choices, some of them don't have amazing voices and yes, correct *nussach hatefillah*- the modes and tunes of prayer- is a dying art. I hope to have a series of classes soon, with God's help, to remedy some of those problems. But if you know the tune, sing along, and if it's a new tune, listen and learn and *then* sing- and if you aren't comfortable singing, think how awkward it is to try and carry a room that is not into it. It's not just a musical issue, and it is not just *bein adam lemakom*, between man and God- it's *bein adam lechaveiro* as well. If we raise our voices a little bit, we can save others from serious embarrassment.

Of course, it's not only situations where people embarrass themselves in which we have to act with sensitivity. There are so many situations where we need to take extreme, sacrificial care to protect the feelings of those who are in sensitive situations, or to avoid creating these sensitive situations ourselves. Talking about our spouses may be difficult to hear for friends who have not yet found their partner in life, complaining about kids may be painful for those who are struggling with primary or secondary infertility, which should be foremost on our minds at a family centric time like Shmini Atzeres and Simchas Torah. Talking about an upcoming vacation

or issues with a beautiful new home is extremely insensitive to those who can afford neither. The standard counterargument is “That means I can’t talk about anything!” or “Don’t they just want me to treat them like normal people?” Maybe so, but that is not our call to make- it’s theirs. Part of being sensitive to the feelings of others is to anticipate the pain our choice of subject matter can potentially bring about, and being more careful- even sacrificially so- of our words, how they are perceived and by whom.

We are about to recite Yizkor, when we remember those who sacrificed for us, who would never want to see us hurt by others or (usually) to hurt us intentionally Let us learn the lesson of Moshe’s treatment of the water- the lesson of sacrificing ourselves for the comfort and dignity of other Jews. If water can teach us to put the feelings of others about our own enjoyment or discomfort, maybe water really is the key to world peace, and to water being the only thing that flows...